Almost exactly 800 years ago, in his opening sermon of the Fourth Lateran Council in November 1215, Pope Innocent III firmly established his goal of the great ecumenical gathering. Emphasizing that he did not convocate the council for worldly commodities, nor for temporal glory, Innocent III prioritized the reform of the universal Church and the liberation of the Holy Land.¹ In order for a new crusade to be successful, Innocent was convinced that a military campaign would have to be combined with a thorough reform of the Church. Alluding to the Last Supper in the context of Passover, Innocent compared the Exodus to the physical passage for the liberation of the Holy Land, and reform to a spiritual passage. Combined they were an eternal passage to achieve salvation.² Innocent gave a strong sense of urgency to the reform of the Church and to the recruitment of crucesignati for the Fifth Crusade by alluding to Revelation 7:3: “Hurt not the earth, nor the sea, nor the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads”.³

After the conquest of Jerusalem by the forces of the Rashidun caliph Umar in 637, Western authors believed that Christianity would first have to reclaim the Holy City again before the Antichrist could make his appearance and the

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¹ PL 217, col. 674, Sermo vi. In Concilio Generali Lateranensi Habitus (Desiderio desideravi): “non propter commoditatem terrenam, aut gloriam temporalem, sed propter reformationem universalis Ecclesiae, ad liberationem potissimum Terrae Sanctae: propter quae duo principaliter et praecipue hoc sacrum concilium convocavi”.  
² PL 217, col. 674–75.  
³ PL 217, col. 678: “Vobis ergo praecipitur: Transite per mediam civitatem, sequentes eum, summum videlecet sacerdotem, quasi ducem, principem, et magistrum, ut percutiatis interdiciendo et suspendendo, excommunicando et deponendo, prout culpae qualitas postulaverit, omnem super quem non inveneritis Thau signatum ab ipso, qui claudit, et nemo aperit; aperit, et nemo claudit. Signatis enim nocendum non est, juxta quod alibi dicitur: ‘Nolite nocere terrae, neque mari, neque arboribus, quoadusque signemus servos Dei nostri in frontibus eorum’.”
events described in the Book of Revelation could unfold. Especially after the turn of the millennium, when the Augustinian Sixth Age had passed, the defeat of the Antichrist was near. This would introduce the start of the final age, the thousand-year Sabbath, which was to precede the end of times and the Last Judgement. Contemporary accounts leave little doubt on the crusades to the Holy Land taking place in this apocalyptic atmosphere. Specifically for the First Crusade, Jay Rubenstein recently noted that the Crusaders were not just fighting for the earthly Jerusalem, but also for the heavenly city, “they were waging an apocalypse”. The defeat of the Latin army in the Battle of Hattin in 1187 and Saladin’s subsequent capture of Jerusalem evidently caused a shock in the West. While Saladin was often referred to as an (or the) Antichrist, the tragic loss of the Holy City and of the relic of the True Cross was regarded as a severe punishment from God.

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6 Guibert of Nogent’s version of Urban II’s speech at Clermont in 1095, for instance, placed the capture of Jerusalem in the context of the approaching time of the Antichrist. Although Guibert of Nogent wrote with hindsight and was not present at the launch of the crusade at Clermont, his account reflects the eschatological rhetoric used by contemporaries after the success of the First Crusade. GN, 113.


9 James of Vitry wrote that the Franks had brought the wrath of God upon themselves and that the “shield of divine protection” had been taken away. James of Vitry, *Historia Orientalis*, ed. J. Donnadieu (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008) [hereafter as H.Or.], 436: “Ut autem certis indicis et evidentibus signis Dominum sibi terribiliter offenderum agnoscerent et divine protectionis clipeum ab ipsis recessisse non dubitarent, lignum salutifere crucis quod die illo tenebroso in prelio detulerunt, lamentabili infortunio amiserunt.”